

# DIGENES AKRITES

New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry

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## Armenia and Armenians in the Byzantine Epic

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After the first and second partition of Armenia between Sassanian Persia and the East Roman Empire (in A.D. 387 and 591), and again after the Arab conquest of Armenia, many Armenian aristocrats emigrated to Byzantium, where they attained high-ranking positions. As early as 414, in the Codex Theodosianus, we find the name of a certain *praepositus* Muselios, a name belonging to the Mamikonian feudal family. It may therefore be concluded that the *praepositus* Muselios belonged to the well-known family which held the supreme command of the Arsacid armies. Subsequently other bearers of this name will reach high office (Muselios, Musele, Mosele), of whom the most outstanding is Alexios Musele. Yet another will appear in the guise of ἑξάκουστος Μουσελῶμ in the Byzantine epic, as the maternal great-grandfather of Digenes Akrites.

Armenian dignitaries moved to Byzantium again after the second partition of Armenia in 591, but the Arab conquest provoked a mass exodus. There is no need here to mention the many Armenian emperors and military personnel, the three Armenian patriarchs of Constantinople, two saints of the Orthodox Church, and many men of letters. This phenomenon is well-known, but I draw attention to it in order to show that it is not futile to follow through the same phenomenon in the Byzantine epic, most of whose episodes take place in a more or less Armenian environment. The first to have written on this was the distinguished Armenian historian and literary scholar, Nicholas Adontz. Subsequent research has vindicated his opinions.

### *Geography in the epic*

First let us consider the geography of the epic. The cradle of Byzantine epic poetry is Cappadocia, which under Diocletian was called Armenia II, under Justinian I Armenia III, while in the seventh century along with Pontos it constituted the Armenian theme. It is here, and specifically at the place called Lykandos, that the future father-in-law of Digenes has his home. We know from Constantine Porphyrogenitus that Lykandos had been barren and uninhabited until the time of Leo VI (ἔρημος ἦν . . . καὶ ἀοίκητος) and that Melias and his Armenians

τὴν πόλιν τοῦ πτώματος ἤγειρε καὶ προβαίνουσα ἐπὶ τὸ πρόσθεν  
 πᾶσα ἡ χώρα μεστὴ γέγονεν τῶν Ἀρμενίων . . . Ἡ δὲ ὀνομασία  
 τῆς πόλεως ἀρχαία τις καὶ παλαιὰ ἀπὸ τῆς τῶν Ἀρμενίων γενεᾶς  
 καὶ τε καὶ γλώττης ὠνόμαστο (*De Thematribus* 75–6).

In this way the birthplace of Digenes' mother turns out to be the Armenian city 'burgeoning with Armenians' of the period of Leo VI.

Digenes' homeland on his father's side is the city of Πουχᾶ (A939, 952, 957),<sup>1</sup> which appears as 'Urha' in the Armenian sources ('Urfa' is the later Turkish name), which is identified with Edessa in Osroene, in Syria, where the Armenian element had always been present, and which even at the beginning of native Armenian historiography, in the fifth century, is considered an Armenian city, just as the Syrian Kingdom of Osroene is considered an Armenian Kingdom, and its King Augaros who embraced Christianity is likewise considered an Armenian King. It should be noted here that when Digenes departs with his bride from Cappadocia, he makes his headquarters at a place called Trosis, in the Arab–Byzantine borderland, which was identified by Grégoire with the Turkish town of Turuş in the *vilayet* of Urfa/Edessa. Under Justinian this region was known as Armenia IV.

Every commentator on the Πουχᾶ of the epic has identified it with Urfa/Edessa. Stylianos Alexiou, who has studied the Byzantine epic so fundamentally and profoundly – and is justly considered an expert among scholars of *Digenes Akrites*, and to whom we shall often be referring in connection with historical and geographical issues – prefers the Παχέ of the Escorial version and identifies it not with Urha, but with the Arabic Raqqah, south of Edessa. This conjecture, I must confess, does not convince me. And while on the subject of Πουχᾶ/Urha, I find it necessary also to discuss in more detail the enigmatic toponym *Agrita*, which is mentioned by the Arab geographer of the ninth century al-Fakihi as the capital of the Byzantine theme of Chaldia.

A great deal has already been written upon this subject. It has been understood as a reference to Crete; to the theme of Lykandos, as the theme *par excellence* of the *akritai*; to the region of Pontos or Armenia; and as a general descriptive term by which the Muslims denoted the *akritai* of the frontiers. Recently the issue has been re-examined by I. Anagnostakis, who believes that *Agrita* is probably the Byzantine–Arab borderland in the eighth century, but referred to by Arab writers as the seat of the *strategos* of Chaldia (Anagnostakis 1989). Drawing on information from Ptolemy and Pliny about the χώρα Ἑκρητική or Ἑκρηκτική, and the *Regio Gegrítica* or *Agritice*, he proceeds to an extended discussion of Armenian geography in the seventh century. As a result, Anagnostakis has been able to offer information which perhaps provides a complete solution to the riddle (1989: 67).

<sup>1</sup> References to the A version in this paper are to the edition by Kalonaros (1941).

The Armenian *Geography* mentions this country or region as *Egrewiki* and *Agriwiki*, by which are meant the present-day Mengrelia which Anagnostakis identifies with the *Aqrita* of the Arab writers; although he concludes by saying that 'at the end of the day problems like that of Ikritiya–Aqrita may be consigned to being susceptible of more than one plausible solution' (Anagnostakis 1989: 69). That is to say, he considers the identification *Aqrita* = *Egrewiki* = *Agriwiki* to be a mere possibility, and not the final answer to the enigma.

What is the weak point in these theories? All the possibilities discussed so far refer to a 'country' or 'province'. How can the seat of the *strategos* of Chaldia be a country, and indeed far from the Byzantine theme of Chaldia? It is far from certain that, at the period which concerns us, the present-day Mengrelia was included within the boundaries of that theme.

In many Armenian manuscripts of the *Matenadaran* (preserved in the Centre for Research into Ancient Manuscripts in Erevan) there occurs a sort of *Nomina Urbium Mutata*, or geographical list of ancient toponyms. Its author was the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory of Caesarea (c. 1570–1636). Alongside the ancient names, those current at the time are also given. The majority of toponyms relate to Armenia, but no small number also relate to Greece and parts of Asia Minor. In order to assure ourselves of the author's knowledge, it is worth quoting some of his identifications:

- Ankouria (i.e. Ancyra) – the town of Enguri
- Axios – the river Vardar Su
- Byzantion – the city of Stambol
- Edesia – the town of Ourfa
- Ellada – the *vilayet* of Ouroumeli
- Evbia – the island of Eiripoz [Euripos]
- Epesos – the town of Ayasoulou
- Mazak – the town of Gaïseri [Caesarea]
- Melos, or Milos – the river Garasu [Mavropotamos]

One manuscript, however, no. 8189, includes at the end a toponym not found in many other manuscripts known to me. On f. 147<sup>v</sup> we read: 'Aqrita – the town of Orha'. Orha (or Urha) is, as we have seen, Edessa in Syria.

Naturally the mention in our manuscript does not solve the riddle; on the contrary, it makes it darker still. For Edessa was never the capital of the theme of Chaldia; what is more, it was not even *in* Chaldia. Without claiming to have solved the riddle, I should like to point out that in the Armenian as well as in the Syriac sources, 'Chaldaean' appears as a synonym for 'Syrian'. In the prologue to a Syriac manuscript of the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, 'the book of Marimpas the Chaldaean' is noted as a source. An Armenian historian of the fifth century, Moses Chorenos, regards the same Syrian writer as Chaldaean (μελετητῇ χαλδαϊκῶν [i.e. Syriac] γραφῶν). Could it be that the Arab writers confused the theme of Chaldaea with Syria, whose capital was indeed Edessa/Urha?

Other Armenian toponyms are mentioned in the epic, such as Charziane (G1.6, 56; 4.42), which has nothing in common with the Charsianon theme, as is often supposed,<sup>2</sup> but is the district of Chorziane–Chorzianene (Armenian Chorzian), of Armenia IV. It is worth noting here that these are not the only mentions of Armenia IV. Who are the ἔθνη and the σατράπαι recorded by the epic (A4066, 3857, 4335, 4365), if not the inhabitants of Armenia IV, who are called ἔθνη (*gentes*) in Justinian's Novel 31, in the Justinianic code, in the *De Aedificiis* of Procopius, and the feudal landlords/administrators of Armenia IV, who are known to the same, as well as to the Armenian, sources as σατράπαι?

The town of Akina in the epic (A 658) is the Armenian town of Akn (gen. Akna; the modern Egin), on the upper bank of the Euphrates, which from the tenth century until 1915 was a major centre of Chalcedonian diphysites. Finally Achaia (A2419) has nothing to do with the province of the same name in the Peloponnese but is Armenian Mananale, an important centre of the Paulicians, who called it Achaia. Nor should we forget that Digenes' paternal grandfather was Chrysocheir, commander in chief of the Paulicians, while his father's uncle was Karbeas, another commander of the same heretics.

### *Personal names in the epic*

Among other characters in the epic that could be considered to be of Armenian origin is Mouselom, Digenes' great grandfather on his mother's side. In the A version the brothers of Digenes' mother-to-be address the Emir of Roucha in these words:

πατήρ μας δὲ ὁ Ἀαρὼν ἐκ τῶν Δουκῶν τὸ γένος, . . .  
καὶ Μουσελῶμ ὁ θαυμαστὸς πατήρ ἦν τοῦ πατρὸς μας (A489, 491)

which is a perfectly correct and normal expression. In E we read:

«Πατήρ μας ἦτον Ἀαρὼν καὶ θεῖος μας ὁ Καροήλης,  
ὁ Μουσελῶμ ὁ ἐξάκουστος πατήρ ἦν τοῦ πατρὸς μας  
καὶ ἐκεῖ τοὺς ἐνταφίασαν ἔς τὸν τάφον τοῦ προφήτου. (E145–7)

The words καὶ θεῖος μας ὁ Καροήλης, according to Kalonaros, 'are due to a misunderstanding caused by confusion on the part of the redactor'. Regarding the burial at the Tomb of the Prophet, he notes that the redactor's confusion 'has been exacerbated by the incoherence of the line'. It is not hard to conclude that this line has nothing to do with the events just narrated and is left hanging in the air.

Alexiou is wrong, in my view, to transpose these lines of E, so that the words of the brothers are placed in the mouth of the Emir, with the result that Aaron Doukas, descended from the Kinnamades, becomes the Arab Caliph Harun

<sup>2</sup> Trapp, for example, silently corrects Χαρχιανή (Mavrogordato 1956) to Χαρσιανή and glosses as θέμα in his index of proper names (1971).

al Rashid (Trapp, for Aaron, gives Ἀμβρών), while Mouselom becomes the Emir's grandfather and son of Haroun al Rashid. In transposing these lines, Alexiou ought to have noted that the place of the Girl's brothers (plural) has been usurped by the Emir, who could not possibly have said 'our father was Aaron ...', but would have had to say 'my father ...' In this way, according to Alexiou, the Byzantine nobleman Mouselom, whose name is the Armenian Mušel (let us recall here the *praepositus* Muselios of 414, who was no Arab) becomes an Arab and is identified with the Arab general Masalma who invaded Asia Minor or with Abumuslim (a 'former slave' according to Theophanes), who is inexplicably called by Alexiou 'Mousalim'.

The name Mušel, which has nothing Arabic about it, derives from the Hittite Mušil. In the *Shahname* of Firdowsi this Armenian name appears as Mūšīl, while the Arabs write Mūšail. The earliest mention of this name among Armenians dates from the third century.

Digenes' grandfather on his father's side, as we noted, was Chrysocherpes, or Chrysocheir, the renowned commander-in-chief of the Paulicians, while his uncle, again on the father's side, was Karbeas, who preceded Chrysocheir in that role. The name of the uncle in the epic, Karoes, is Karo, the diminutive of the Armenian name Karapet, to which has been added the Greek suffix της (just as with Μελεμέντζης -ης, Μαϊδάκ -ης, on which see below). Karbeas is also a diminutive of this name: in Armenian Karpis, or Karbis. In an akritic song published by Grégoire, he is called Καραβιέρης, which must be related to Καραπέτης (assimilated to καράβι in Greek).

On the *apelatai* Melementzes (Μελεμέντζης, and not Μελεμέτζης as Alexiou has it) much has been written. First Adontz and then Grégoire identified him with the renowned Melia/Mleh (*mentz* in Armenian means 'great'). If he too, like the Paulician heretics Sergios and Baanes, but also like their commander-in-chief Karbeas with thousands of their followers, fled to Melitene and sought asylum among the Arabs, it is not unlikely that he was a Paulician. Alexiou prefers the Escorial reading, Μιλιμίτσης, since he regards Melementzes as 'a less reliable form'. Why? According to Alexiou the ending -ίτσης is a very common Byzantine diminutive of the Arabic name Melem, which, he claims, means 'strong'. This name he even finds in the toponym Maleme in Crete.

But how are we to understand this name if it means 'a little bit strong'? Can a warrior whom Maximou εἶχε πρῶτον ἄγουρον ἐξάρχοντα τῶν ἄλλων (G6.428), and who εἰς χιλίους οὐδέποτε συνεργοῦ ἐδεήθη (G6.492) be so described? But if the Arabic name is Melem, should the correct form not logically be Melementzes, instead of Milimitzes? But even the translation of Melem as 'strong' is not certain.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The same Arabic root can be realized as *melām*: ethnarch; *mālām*: bad man; *malam*: curse; *melamm*: mainland.

We noted above that this character is named in the A version as Melementzes and not Melemetzes. At first sight this is a trivial difference; however in this case the letter 'n' has considerable significance, as it underlines the Armenian nature of the name. In Armenian *metz* is the learned form of the word *mentz*, which means 'great'. This is the true significance of the name Melementzes.

Other names, which in my opinion are of Armenian origin, are: Apochalpes; Maiakes and the Mousouphres of the E version. The future father of Digenes, the Emir, says (Kalonaros 1941):

καὶ ἐγὼ ἐκινήθουν . . .  
 . . . μὲ τὸν Ἀποχάλπην,  
 τὸν ἔγγονον τοῦ γέροντος τοῦ Μαΐακη . . . (E 505–7)<sup>4</sup>

In the early editions of the E version the name appears as Μαΐακης. Alexiou adopts 'the correct reading by Karayanni: τὸν ἔγγονον τοῦ Μαΐακῆ' (1985: 94). The diaeresis had been adopted a decade before Karayanni's study by myself, without even having access to the manuscript, simply on the basis of the fact that the name is Armenian: Hmayak.

If Apochalpes is the grandson of Maiakes, and Μαΐακης the Armenian name Hmayak (the grandfather of the Armenian Emperor of Byzantium Basil I was called Μαΐκτης, i.e. Hmayak), then the grandson must also be Armenian. Apochalpes corresponds to Apokapes in the Byzantine and Abukap in the Armenian sources. After George Maniakes, the first Governor of the town of Edessa (that is, Urha, the Roucha of the epic), his place was taken by the Armenian Apokapes. This name was turned by the Byzantines into a patronymic. Many Armenians at that time had Arabic names of this sort. Constantine Porphyrogenitus mentions an Armenian Prince of Taron by the name of Apoganem (Abu Ghanim). At the same period we have Armenian noblemen with such names as Abu-l-Gharib, Abu-l-Jahab. The father and son of Senekerim, King of Bospourakan, were both named Abu-Sahl. Known nobles of Bapourakan are Abu-Belj, Abu-Jafar, Abu-Haya, Abu-Mugdem, Abu-Haraz; other nobles families include such names as Abu-Sahak, Abu-Selm, Abu-Set (Said), and many others.

The name Maiakes, for Alexiou, 'is reminiscent of Syrian names and toponyms such as Maiouma, Mai-Fermat, etc.', and the bearer of this name is a 'Saracen' (1979: 28). But why should we have recourse to Syria and Arabia, when this Armenian name appears in the poem intact? The origin of the name is Persian (Humayak, meaning 'blessed'). In the form Humaya ('Υμέης in Herodotus) it was the name of the brother-in-law and general of Darius I. The Chief Magician of the time of Shah Bahram Gur (420–21), according to the

<sup>4</sup> For the MS readings and Alexiou's emendations see S. Alexiou 1985: *apparatus criticus* and p. 94.

*Shah-nameh*, was called Homai. The name Hmayak occurs among the Armenians from the earliest times, and has nothing to do with the Arabs.

As for Mousouphres, which is indisputably the Arabic al-Muzaffar, this was, according to Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the name of the son of the famous Armenian General Manuel, in the form Moudaphar.

Finally I should like to comment on the name Ankylas (Ἀγκύλας), which is found in the Trebizond, Athens and Oxford versions. Ankylas is a giant of untold physical strength. His home is in Mesopotamia and he alone is credited with having defeated Digenes in a skirmish. According to George of Cyprus, Upper Mesopotamia corresponds to Armenia IV. In this province was a region which the Byzantine sources call Angilene, whose capital is the Fortress of Angel (Ἀγγέλ). Here were the tombs of the ancient Armenian kings, as well as their treasury. Angel was a famous religious centre where a divinity by the name of Angelia was worshipped. This divinity by the Early Middle Ages had become a hero. The Armenian historian of the fifth century, Moses Chorenos, compares Angelia with the Jewish Samson, the Persian Rostom and the Greek Heracles, and writes that in Armenia epic songs are sung about him, and legends told, chiefly in Armenia IV, which includes Angilene, that is, in the later akritic provinces of Byzantium, which were largely inhabited by Armenians. We should not be surprised to find these songs echoed in the Byzantine epic. If Angelia is the Greek Heracles, then ἡ χώρα τοῦ Ἡρακλέως in the Byzantine epic is none other than Angilene, which in Armenian is called Angelton – the Province of Angelia, that is, of Heracles, and the phrase in the poem is simply a literal translation into Greek of the Armenian toponym. This could have been converted by the compiler or copyist into Ἡράκλεια, as the name of a city, since χώρα τοῦ Ἡρακλέως sounds strange, but to change a city by the name of Herakleia into χώρα τοῦ Ἡρακλέως, and to place it in Charziane or Cappadocia, is improbable indeed.

Even if all the evidence presented above for Armenian content (toponyms, proper names) were absent, the allusion to Armenian epic songs in the Byzantine epic would be enough by itself to draw attention to Armenian elements in *Digenes Akrites*.

In conclusion I should like to emphasize that the Armenian element in the Byzantine epic is nothing but the reflection of historical reality which was discussed at the beginning of this paper. Just as the presence in Byzantium of numerous emperors, generals, high-ranking churchmen and men of letters of Armenian origin has never challenged the Hellenic character of the Byzantine state, so may the same be said of the Armenians and their deeds in the Byzantine epic of *Digenes Akrites*.